NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

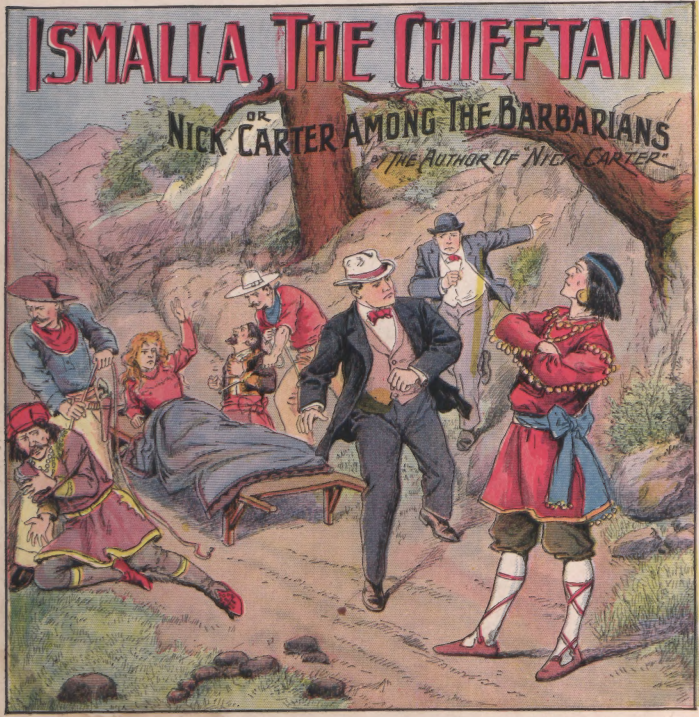
Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.

No. 502 NEW YORK, AUGUST 11, 1906. Price, Five Cents

ISMALLA, THE CHIEFTAIN

OR, NICK CARTER AMONG THE BARBARIANS

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



The litter fell to the trail with a crash and a scream from Jessie. At the same instant Nick Carter leaped from his place of concealment and confronted Ismalla.

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Ismalla, the Chieftain;

OR,

Nick Carter Among the Barbarians.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNNAMED PERIL.

Nick Carter and his first assistant, Chick, were in the State of Idaho, at a place called Murray, which is located among the foot-hills of the western slope of the Bitter Root Mountains.

A somewhat remarkable case, which had been submitted to him by a Montana cowboy named Tom Short, and which is entered in his books under the caption of "The Man From Montana," had just been completed, and the two detectives were indulging themselves in a well-earned vacation.

The case referred to had brought about some strange experiences, strangest among them all being the discovery by Nick Carter of the wonderful cavern of gold where a young girl named Jessie Bowden had been held a prisoner until the detective found and rescued her.*

While penetrating the secrets of that cavern, Nick Carter had found the descendants of a race of people long since forgotten; a very old man, a very old woman, three middle-aged sons, and a grandson who was but little older than Jessie Bowden; and it had been for the purpose of perpetuating this almost extinct race of people by forcing the young woman into a marriage with the grandson that Jessie Bowden had been stolen away.

But the detective had saved her.

He had gone to the cavern alone, he had penetrated its depths, had found her, and, after a series of strange and wonderful adventures, he had brought her out of the place while the inmates of the cavern were sleeping.

This is an important point in the story that is to follow, for the reason that it shows that Nick Carter, in all the world, was the only man—other than those who lived there—who possessed accurate knowledge of the locality of the mountain and the cavern of gold.

Four days had passed since the return of the detective and his friends from the mountains, and during this time they had been resting.

The party had consisted of Nick and his assistant

*See No. 501 of the *Nick Carter Weekly*, "The Man From Montana."

Chick, accompanied by Tom Short and a partner of his named Cal Huskins; and also by Hilda Hart, a young woman of Jessie's age, who had been with her at the time of her capture and who had accompanied them on the expedition in order to afford them what assistance she could.

Very little had been said about the cavern of gold since their return, for the detective had been reluctant to talk about it, and his friends had respected his feelings on the matter and had refrained from questioning him.

On this particular morning, however, Nick and big Tom Short had walked away from the house after breakfast, and were seated on a boulder overlooking the town, when Tom said to the detective:

"I've been aching to ask yeh something, Nick, and I hope yeh won't get hot around the collar if I do it."

"I don't think I will, Tom. What is it?" replied the detective.

"I've been a-wantin' to ask yeh something about that there cavern uh gold, where yeh discovered Jessie."

"What do you want to know about it, Tom?"

"Well, I reckon I want to know about all that yeh'r to tell me about it, if a prairie-dog should sit up somewhere on his haunches and ask yeh. What was it like, anyhow?"

"It was exactly as Hilda described it to you before you came to me and told me about it, Tom," replied the detective.

"Jest a set of rooms and corridors that had been chiseled out, 'r sawed out, 'r dug out uh solid gold, hey?"

"Just that."

"Jest as though a great big chunk uh smelted gold, bigger'n a block uh city houses, had been dropped down inside uh that mountain, after which somebody had moseyed along and dug a residence out of it, in the meantime makin' use uh the gold that was taken out, hey?"

"Exactly. And that is what did happen, centuries ago, Tom."

"How do yeh mean, Nick?"

"I mean that the gold was placed where it is, and in the form that it is, by volcanic action. The fire of the volcano searched out a rich gold-mine that was hidden away somewhere in the earth. The fire melted the rock that surrounded the gold, and it made liquid of the gold itself; and then, when it was cooling, the gold was poured out of the volcano in a mass and left in the place where it is now. There it cooled and hardened into the great mass of pure metal that it is now."

"It's soft, too, ain't it, Nick?"

"Just about the consistency of lead; possibly rather more compact."

"And how much of it do you reckon there is? Hey?"

"Nobody can answer that question; but your remark of a moment ago may not be very far astray."

"Yeh mean when I said it was bigger'n a block uh city houses?"

"Yes."

"It couldn't be mined, could it, Nick?"

"No. Explosives would not touch it. It could only be dug out, or bored out."

"I s'pose there's enough gold there to buy the hull world, ain't there, Nick?"

"I haven't any doubt that there is gold enough in that mountain to more than represent the total capital of the world."

"And that's some. Eh?"

"Yes."

"Has it occurred to yeh, Nick, that yeh'r the only livin' man who knows where that there mountain is located?"

"Yes."

"And that there are men who would give their very souls for the knowledge that you possess?"

"I haven't a doubt of it. And Tom, before you speak again, let me say one thing right on the spot."

"All right, Nick."

"I have determined that I will never reveal the secret of that place to anybody. I have decided that I will keep the knowledge that I possess to myself. I have made up my mind that the mountain and the cavern of gold shall remain as unknown as it always has, and that the people who live there—the descendants of the original guardians of the treasure that were placed there perhaps centuries ago—shall, so far as I am concerned, continue as unmolested in the future as they have been in the past."

"I don't know as I blame yeh, Nick."

"I don't want the gold, or any part of it. I have wealth enough without it."

"I reckon that's no idle dream."

"You, Tom, specifically told me before we started to find the place that you did not want it; that if I found the mine, I could have it, so far as you were concerned—and now I propose to take you at your word and claim it; only, in claiming it, I give it back at once to the people who rightfully own it—the people who live there."

"I ain't a-kickin', Nick."

"I thought you were."

"Not a bit of it."

"Then what were you driving at when you began to talk about it?"

"I was only a-thinkin', Nick, that mebby yeh didn't realize the position yeh'r in."

"The position I'm in? How do you mean, Tom?"

"As bein' the only galoot this side uh heaven who knows how to find that mountain."

"Oh! I see."

"Them folks up there ain't goin' to let yeh rest, Nick, accordin' to my way uh thinkin'."

"I don't anticipate that they will bother me, Tom."

"Yeh see, Nick, they don't know how yeh feel about it. They know that you know the way in and the way out, and they ain't got no call to suppose yeh won't tell everybody yeh meet all about it."

"Tom, I don't believe that any one of the six people who live in that cavern have ever in all their lives been inside a house, or on the streets of a city or even a village, or fifty miles away from the place they call home."

"I don't agree with yeh, and I'll tell yeh why presently; but even if that is so, it ain't too doggoned late f'r them to make a try at travelin' now, is it? There's that young, good-lookin' feller what you told about as the grandson—he might take a notion to come out and mingle with the world and look for yeh, mightn't he?"

"I don't think so. But what makes you suppose that any of them have ever been away from that cavern, Tom?"

"Didn't yeh tell me that the ole man spoke English mighty well?"

"Yes."

"Where'd he learn it?"

"Possibly from books."

"Where'd he git the books? And where'd he learn how to read 'em if he did git 'em?"

"That is a good point, Tom. Probably you are right about it, too."

"And there's another point."

"What is that?"

"I have already heard yeh say that you believe the outfit is descended from some ancient people who inhabited this country before our own history was thought about."

"Yes; that is my idea."

"Well, accordin' to that, they have managed to keep that family uh guardians uh the gold—as yeh call 'em—alive f'r a good many hundred years, ain't they?"

"I suppose so."

"How'd they do it, Nick? They had to raise children, didn't they? They couldn't intermarry, could they, and keep on a-livin' all these years? They have had to get wives f'r their sons, haven't they? They've had to git 'em somewhere else than in their own cavern, haven't they?"

"Go on, Tom. You are getting interesting."

"That's why they stole Jessie, wasn't it? They wanted to make her the wife of that grandson, didn't they? Do yeh want to know jest what I think about it, Nick?"

"I certainly do."

"Well, I've been givin' the matter a good deal uh thought. I've put one thing with another, and I figger it out like this: When a girl is born in that there cavern she is sacrificed to the gods they worship; anyhow, she's put out of the way. When a son is born, he is prized a hull lot more'n all their gold. Then, bimeby, when he's old enough, one uh the outfit strikes the trail in search of a wife for him. I don't s'pose it makes much difference to them where they find her, as long as they get her. Accordin' to them, she has only one destiny in life to fulfil, and that is to furnish sons for 'em in order that their breed and brand may be perpetuated. When she has done that, if she ain't thoroughly happy and contented in her new life, she is jest put out uh the way. That's what would have happened to Jessie if you hadn't found her. But it's the thing that's goin' to happen to you that's a-interestin' me jest now."

"And what do you think that is, Tom?"

"I think that they are going to strike your trail and follow it till they get you. That's what I think."

CHAPTER II.

NICK CARTER'S DIRE PERIL.

The detective laughed a little at the vehemence of Tom Short's prophecy.

"If they do that," he said, "they won't be the first ones who have camped on my trail, Tom," he said.

"I don't s'pose they will; but they will be the first of their kind. I ain't seen 'em and you have, and, therefore, you know uh hull lot more about 'em than I do; but, judgin' from the manner in which they captured Jessie and carried her away. I should give it as a doggoned good opinion that they ain't no slouches. Tell me something more about them, won't yeh, Nick?"

"What do you wish to know about them?"

"What sort of uh chap is that old duffer yeh told about?"

"He is a very old man, Tom; anywhere from ninety to over a hundred, I should say."

"And the ole woman?"

"She's about the same."

"Are they the same brand? Them two?"

"I think so."

"That's the reason they have let her live, I s'pose."

"Probably; if we accept your ideas about their practises as the correct ones."

"Now, what about them three middle-aged ones; eh?"

"They are all evidently sons of the old man and woman."

"And one of 'em is the father of the youngster, eh?"

"Probably."

"And their wives, and the other children, if they had any, have died off, 'r been killed off, eh?"

"We will admit that that might be true, too."

"So jest at the present minute they're puttin' all their money on the youngster to continue the line of descent."

"I suppose so."

"Yeh said that they were all big men, didn't yeh?"

"Yes; big, strong, handsome men, with complexions

almost the color of the gold in the cavern; with muscles of steel, with handsome faces and fine figures."

"And the young chap——"

"He is taller and handsomer and, I should say, stronger than any of them."

"Well, Nick, yeh can bet yeh'r sweet life on one thing."

"What is that?"

"They ain't goin' to let us rest, nohow. Jessie and Hilda have both seen the inside of that cavern. They let Hilda go, once, and by lettin' her go, they brought you there. I've got it a-squirmin' inside uh me that there'll be something doin', presently."

"Such as—what?"

"Such as nailin' you to the cross if they can do it; such as goin' on a still hunt after the two girls again, the minute that you're out uh the way."

"Well, what do you propose, in order to obviate such a condition?"

"Hey?"

"How do you propose a remedy?"

"I propose that you start East to-morrow morning and that you take the two girls with you and put 'em in a boardin'-school, 'r a convent, 'r something, when yeh get 'em there."

Nick laughed.

"All right," he said. "I'll discuss it with the two girls, and with Hilda's mother; but I won't be ready to start to-morrow morning—nor in less than a week. You are not to rid yourself of me quite so easily as all that."

At half-past three o'clock that same afternoon Nick mounted Tom's big horse and started for a ride, and it so happened that his friends, being occupied at the time, nobody saw him go.

His intention at the time was to go only a short distance and return; but the horse he rode was big and strong and fleet, and he had been deprived of his accustomed exercise of late, so that when the detective gave him the rein, he dashed away up the trail with all the freedom and much of the speed of a deer.

Nick enjoyed it, and he rode farther than he intended, enjoying the exercise and the scenery to its utmost.

In this way he rode along steadily for rather more than an hour, when suddenly he pulled up with an exclamation of surprise.

He was at the mouth of the coulée, where Hilda and Jessie had once been captured and carried away into captivity; the coulée which was the beginning of the long trail which led to the cavern of gold; the coulée which delved into the mountains until it became a deep cañon.

He was twenty miles from Murray—farther away from home than he supposed; and, having pulled his horse to a standstill, he sat for a moment quite still in the saddle, gazing around him.

It was full time that he should be returning. He knew that; and after a moment he wheeled the horse about, and touched him lightly with the spurs.

The animal bounded forward—and just as he did so a man leaped into the trail directly behind the detective.

With a quick motion he whirled the loop of a horsehair rope around his head, and then, as the horse which bore Nick Carter started away at a gallop, he cast it.

It was all done so quickly, so deftly, and so silently that Nick had not the least idea that it was done at all, or that there was another human being near him, until that deadly loop settled over his head and shoulders.

He discovered it just too late; and the next instant he was jerked from the saddle to the ground, while the horse, frightened by what had happened, dashed madly away down the trail toward home.

When the detective struck the ground he was stunned, although he was not rendered entirely unconscious.

Nevertheless, he was dazed.

He could not use his muscles. He could not think. He could do nothing to defend himself.

He had only a confused idea that something had happened, but he did not know what it was.

As in a dream, he saw men bending over him. He fancied that they were doing something to him or with him, but he did not know what it was.

In fact, it was not until many minutes later that he had a full realization of what had happened, and then he came to his senses with a jerk.

He was stretched upon some kind of a litter, and he was tied to it so that he could barely move at all.

He realized that his feet had been tied to it separately, and that his arms and hands had been treated in the same manner, while, in addition to that, the horsehair rope had been wound several times around his body and the litter.

Two men were carrying it; one in front and the other behind.

Two more men were trotting along beside it, one on either side, and in them he at once recognized the young men of the cavern of gold and one of the elder men.

"Here, you!" he called out to them. "Where are you taking me?"

They might have been stone deaf for all the attention they paid to his question. They neither turned their heads nor answered, but continued to plod on with that interminable fox-trot which is peculiar to the Indian.

The sun, now low in the heavens, shone directly up the coulée and glistened upon their strange costumes decorated with fancifully woven and many-colored quills, which were punctuated with opals and amethysts and garnets, and which were held together by huge buttons that had been hammered out of solid gold.

"I wonder if these chaps understand English?" thought the detective. "The old man at the cavern does; I know that; and so it follows that he should have

taught it to his sons and grandson. I know they are not deaf, for I have seen them converse together, once.

"Tom was right, all right," he continued his train of thought a moment later. "They did strike the trail after me, sure enough; and I, like a chump, went out to meet them.

"They have got me tied up for fair, too. If I were three times as strong as I am, I could not hope to break this horsehair rope; and now I suppose they are going to take me back to that cavern of theirs and make an example of me."

It was not a pleasant prospect to consider, at the best.

He knew that they would not again leave him unguarded as they had once before, and he felt in his heart that he could not expect much mercy or consideration from them now, for they regarded their charge of the mountain and the cavern of gold as a sacred one, and they would not hesitate to put him to death for possessing their secret.

"I wish I could make that young chap talk," he thought, a little later. "And I wish they would put this infernal litter down, and rest for a few moments."

As if in reply to that unuttered wish of his, they did that very thing.

The younger man spoke sharply in an unknown tongue to his companions, and they at once came to a halt. The litter was placed upon the ground, and the four men squatted about it with their arms locked around their knees, silently regarding the detective.

"I suppose you are taking me to your cavern, aren't you?" he asked of them generally, but without addressing any one of them particularly.

No answer. No motion. No change of expression in any one of the faces.

"You have been worrying yourselves lest I would tell somebody how to find your cavern of gold," he added.

No answer. No motion, or change of attitude.

"If it will do you any sort of good to know it," continued the detective, "I will assure you that I have told nobody how to find the way there. The secret remains with me, and I had already determined never to reveal it."

No reply. No apparent notice of his statement.

"You're a nice, sociable lot of chumps, aren't you?" demanded Nick indignantly.

No answer.

"If you would only just let me get up off of this litter, I could soon make some of you squeal if I can't make you talk," he said, then.

No answer.

Nick waited a moment, and then, fixing his eyes directly upon the young man who was regarding him steadily, he said:

"I don't suppose you care to hear whether Jessie—the girl I rescued from your cavern—is dead, or alive, do you?"

The detective had discovered the open sesame of words at last.

"Tell me of her," replied the young alien calmly, and in perfect English; but Nick noticed that his calmness was entirely assumed, and he realized that the boy—he was scarcely more than that—had been consumed with a desire to ask that very question.

But now it was Nick Carter's turn to remain silent.

"Tell me of her," repeated the young man.

He received no reply.

"Tell me of her!" he demanded, a third time; and this time he half-rose to his feet, and there was a dangerous glitter in his eyes.

All the same, Nick took no notice whatever of the question.

"Tell me of Jessie!" he said once more, and he pronounced the name as if it were spelled H-e-t-z-i-e.

This time, when the detective still did not reply, he rose entirely to his feet, and with one stride was close beside Nick Carter.

Then, drawing a golden-hilted dagger from his girdle, he pressed the point of it against the detective's throat until it drew blood, and he said once more:

"Tell me of her. It is the last time I shall ask you."

CHAPTER III.

CAPTIVE AMONG STRANGE PEOPLE.

Nick Carter smiled up at his tormentor, notwithstanding the fact that the point of the dagger was sticking fully an eighth of an inch into the flesh of his neck.

"Put away that dagger, sit down, and reply to a few questions of mine first, and I will tell you all you want to know about her; otherwise I will tell you nothing," he said coolly.

"Tell me first if she lives."

"I will tell you nothing until you have done as I request," responded the detective; and thus, although bound and helpless, he compelled his captor to obey his will.

The young man put the dagger away. He resumed his attitude of sitting on the rocky floor of the cañon—for they had already passed from the coulée into the cañon—with his hands locked together around his knees, and said:

"Well?"

"First, why have you made me a prisoner?"

"Because you possess our secret—the secret of the mountain."

"But I have told you that I would not betray it."

"We do not believe you."

"You are taking me to the cavern?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do with me when you get me there?"

"That has not been decided."

"Put me to death?"

"Probably."

"At once?"

"Possibly."

"Were you after me particularly to-day?"

"Yes."

"And not after either of the young ladies?"

"That can be done later."

"Do you intend to capture Jessie again, if you can?"

"Yes."

"You are an infernal scoundrel to do such a thing!" said Nick.

The young man shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"What is your name?" asked the detective. "I would like to know how to address you."

"I am Ismalla, the chieftain."

"Oh! You are, eh? The chieftain of what?"

"Of the guardians of the mountain."

"I thought the old man, your grandfather, was the chief of all of you."

"I have inherited it from him."

"Inherited it! Do you mean that he is dead?"

"Yes."

"When? How?"

"He dropped dead in his tracks when he knew that you had escaped and taken our secret away with you. It was remorse because he had been lenient with you and kind to you. It was the shock of knowing that it was his own fault, that killed him."

"And the old woman—your grandmother?"

"She did not outlive him. We buried her beside him. Now, sir, you will tell me of Jessie. I will answer no more questions until you have done so."

"She lives and she is getting well; I will tell you no more about her now."

"It is enough. I thank you."

"How does it happen that you are the chief when these men who are older than you are are still alive?" asked Nick; and he did not ask these questions because he really cared at all about knowing the answers; it was merely his desire to kill time. He had hopes that the horse he had ridden would have reached home before this, and that Tom Short and Cal and Chick would already be on the road to his rescue.

But Ismalla replied with a directness that told Nick Carter that the young chieftain had no fear whatever that his prisoner would escape him.

"They are my uncles," he said. "My father is dead."

"But even so——"

"They have had wives who brought only girls into the world. Our people do not want daughters; they want sons."

"And what has become of the daughters? Where are they? I saw only——"

"They died in infancy."

"You mean that you murdered them? That they were put to death?"

"Females in our family sleep themselves to death ere they are three days old," replied Ismalla calmly. "It is the law of our descent. Our family may not increase too greatly. Only the males survive."

Nick was silent a moment.

The horror of this statement oppressed him; but he understood the significance of it, and also what they regarded as the necessity for such an inexorable rule. Then, recovering himself, he asked:

"Do you know, Ismalla, how many generations your family has watched over and guarded that mountain of gold?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"Why do you wish to know? Why do you ask these questions?"

"The history interests me. I wish to understand if it is possible, how many years have passed since that cavern of gold was dug out of the mountain."

"Years? We have ceased to count the time by years. It is counted by the number of chieftains who have held authority there. I am the nineteenth."

"The nineteenth!"

The detective was astounded. Four generations to a century is a good average, and Ismalla was of the nineteenth, and so, approximately, five hundred years had passed since the present guardianship of the gold began.

He longed to ask many more questions on this same subject, but he saw plainly that the young chief was becoming impatient at the line of questioning, so he changed the subject.

"Where did you learn to speak such perfect English?" he demanded.

"We are not without learning," was the calm reply.

He sprang to his feet then, to indicate that the conversation was at an end so far as he was concerned. Then he spoke rapidly to his companions, and at once they took up the litter again, and that maddening fox-trot began once more.

After an hour passed in this way, and in utter silence so far as conversation was concerned, Nick called out to Ismalla:

"Will you loosen some of these bonds a little for me?"

"No," was the reply. "Do not talk now. If you do, you will receive no answers."

The sun had long since gone down and darkness had fallen, and, there being no moon, there was nothing

visible in the depths of that cañon; nevertheless, the men who bore the litter continued on their way with that same fox-trot, as if they could see as well as in the daylight.

Once before the detective had been up that cañon, and then he had run as these men were running now; but then there had been a bright full moon shining in the heavens directly above it, and the way had been clear before him. Now, he wondered how these men found their way at all.

Human nature has its limitations, and, notwithstanding the jolting of the litter and the uncomfortable position in which the detective was compelled to lie, he presently dropped into a troubled sleep; and from this he did not awaken until the carriers stopped again and the litter was placed upon the ground.

This time there was no conversation while the men rested.

The darkness was inky in its blackness and the detective slept again, to be roused only when the journey was again resumed.

And again he slept until another stop was made; and this time, when he opened his eyes, they had come out of the cañon upon a wide, almost round, grassy plain, which Nick instantly recognized as a place he had seen before, for daylight had appeared and the reflection of the sun was already glorifying the mountain peaks in the distance.

He recalled another trip he had taken across this plain.

He knew that at the opposite side of it there was a V-shaped fissure in the mountainside, and at the apex of it there was a huge rock which moved as if on hinges; that beyond this pear-shaped rock there was a narrow ledge above a deep abyss; that beyond that there was a stairway made by niches cut into the rocks along which a railing of solid gold led to a deep grotto in the side of the mountain.

And there, where that grotto was located, was the entrance to the wonderful cavern which he had only partly explored on the occasion of that other visit.

Then he had gone there of his own accord, in search of the captive girl who had been taken there; and then, because they did not realize his resources, he had escaped.

But now he was being taken there a prisoner; and he well knew that his captors did not intend that he should ever leave the place alive.

They were mysterious, silent, strange people, these captors of his.

They were men who lived only by rules that had been made for their conduct centuries before they were born, and they conducted themselves exactly as if the makers of those rules were still alive and capable of dealing out punishment for disobedience.

They lived upon their legends, not as if they were in reality legends, but precisely as if each man were under a personal order.

If they possessed feeling and emotions, they gave no evidence of the fact—save for the one item of information that Nick possessed to the effect that Ismalla had fallen deeply in love with Jessie while she was a prisoner among them, and when only her illness—a fever with which she had been attacked and from which she suffered while she was in captivity—had saved her from the fate she had been brought there to meet.

He wondered if Tom's horse, which he had been riding at the time he was lassoed, had reached home in safety.

He wondered if his friends were not already hot upon the trail after him.

He regretted now that his sense of honor had compelled him to refrain from revealing to his friends the secret which would have brought them at once to the cavern of gold, to his rescue.

But he had not told it.

All that any of them knew about it was that the hidden entrance to that wonderful place was somewhere within the confines of the valley in which his captors were now halted.

But his conjectures were brought to a sudden close by the continuance of the journey toward the cavern, for at that moment the litter was picked up again, and his bearers started out across the plain.

The two miles to the opposite side were covered in a short time, and then they entered the V-shaped indenture in the rocks.

Here the litter was put down again; and here Ismalla calmly removed some of the bonds which held the detective captive.

The pear-shaped rock was swung aside on its hinges, and the young chieftain, pointing toward the opening, said coldly:

"You will walk ahead of us along the ledge. Your hands are bound behind your back and I hold one end of the rope which binds them. At the first sign of resistance on your part, I will jerk upon the rope and thus plunge you into the abyss below."

For an instant the detective hesitated.

Bound and almost helpless as he was, he for a moment was tempted to fight the four men then and there; but he thought better of it, and, turning sharply, he led the way out upon the ledge.

CHAPTER IV.

A PRISONER FOR LIFE.

You can picture to yourself, if you will, a deep cleft which has been cut by some convulsion of nature, halfway through a lofty mountain. We say half-way through advisedly, for in this case the effect was exactly the same

as if an oblong, instead of a three-cornered, chunk had been cut from one side of a huge, round cheese.

Imagine this cleft to be, from the bottom to the top, several thousand feet in extent, and picture the side walls of it as composed of rock so smooth and straight that it appeared almost as if it were the result of some great feat of engineering.

Then, along one side of this cleft, two or three thousand feet from the bottom and an equal distance from the top, picture to yourself a natural pathway which is formed by a ledge that is nowhere more than three feet in width and is even narrower than that in many places.

You will have then some idea of the pathway which Nick Carter was forced to pursue with his hands tied behind him, and with the knowledge that a man grasped the other end of the rope which bound his wrists together—another man whose wish it doubtless was to destroy him—a man who had brought him there with the confessed purpose of killing him; who at least intended that he should never escape from the place, if such a thing could be prevented.

When the detective started on that perilous walk along the ledge, he could not guess even if he would ever be permitted to reach the opposite end of it; and that is why he hesitated before he started, trying to decide if it would not be better to risk all at once in a fight against his captors than to run the risk of being pushed or thrown off into the chasm.

But he had argued with himself that if it had been the intention of his captors to do away with him at once, they would not have taken the trouble to have brought him as far as they already had done, and with all the labor they had been obliged to expend upon his transportation.

Plainly, he thought, they intended to keep him alive for a time at least.

Why they had elected to do that, he could not tell.

But having chosen, he moved ahead rapidly; and having passed that way once before he went on with considerable more assurance than he would otherwise have done.

Beyond this ledge he knew that there was an even more perilous way to be overcome. That was where the stepping-places had been cut into the rock, and where the gold rail had been fixed in place to cling to while climbing.

"They will be obliged to release my hands when we get there," was his thought. "And then, if they are fools enough to send me up ahead of them, I'll turn when I get to the top and pitch the whole bunch of them into the gulf."

But, as it turned out, they had thought of the possibility of such a contingency as well as he.

He was told, when he reached the end of the ledge, to stop there and wait.

Then one of the men brushed past him and rapidly ascended the steep steps, clinging to the rail as he went.

Then, with two men behind him and one in front of him, the bonds were removed from his wrists and he was told to climb.

Nick realized then that his captors had resolved that they would not be caught napping. They were prepared for every emergency, or for any one that might arise, and he knew now that he would never be given an opportunity to escape if such a thing could be avoided.

The climb was made to the top; to the last step before the ultimate one of pulling himself out upon the flat flooring of the grotto; and here, from the man who had preceded him, he received the order to stop.

When he obeyed, a noose was thrown over his head and drawn taut around his neck. Next, he was ordered to thrust out his hands, and, when he did so, a second noose was drawn tightly around them, and then, before he knew what the man intended to do, he was drawn from his feet and dragged bodily over the edge of the rock platform.

Moreover, while that was being done, a third noose was slipped around his legs and tightened, so that, when he was safely upon the broad, flat floor of the grotto, he was already as firmly bound as he had been at all; he was an utterly helpless man in their hands.

"They treat me as though they thought I were possessed of the strength of seventeen Nick Carters," he thought grimly; and then they crossed the floor space of the grotto, the whole of which was shaped like the half of a dome, and thence, by way of a spiral pathway, down the sides of a cylinderlike hole, they came at last to the door of the cavern.

Nick Carter had never felt so utterly helpless in his life as he did then; but he knew that, for the present at least, he could do nothing, and that the only thing for him to contemplate was to wait.

In utter silence they conducted him into the cavern and through it.

They passed through a big room, where Nick had once discovered the old man, now dead, sleeping in his chair; they journeyed through another corridor, which brought them to a second room not unlike the first, where, at the time of the rescue of Jessie, he had first seen the young man who called himself Ismalla.

Here the walls and the ceiling and the floor upon which they trod were of gold. Here there were quaint furnishings of a forgotten period in the world's history. Here there were curious rugs and blankets and tapestries, woven with an art that has been lost to the world.

They passed beyond this upon a second—or, rather, a third—corridor, where doorways at either side of it led into rooms of gold that had been dug out of the solid metal.

He recognized one of these as being the same in which

he had discovered Jessie sleeping, and from which he had borne her when the rescue was made.

And now they passed on into another part of the cavern, which he had never seen before.

At frequent intervals, everywhere as they passed along, lamps, or rather, tapers set in oil, were burning.

After having covered a considerable distance, the corridor turned to the right, and again to the left through a narrow opening, where they came to a halt in a large room; and here the three older men stepped back again into the corridor, leaving him alone with the chieftain, as he called himself.

"I do not know your name," he said to Nick. "You have not told me that."

"Carter," replied Nick laconically. "What are you going to do with me now?"

"First, I am going to deprive you of every article you carry on your person. Will you remain quiet while I search you? Or shall I call to my uncles?"

"Go ahead," said Nick. "I couldn't offer much resistance in the shape I am in now."

"The gold chains, with which you were fastened once before, proved of little value in the way of holding you," said Ismalla dryly, as he began the search. "This time we will take more care. You had something with you then that cut through the gold. I will see to it now that nothing remains in your possession."

And he did, too.

He emptied every pocket in the detective's clothing; and, when that was accomplished, he stepped back to the doorway into the corridor.

It was evident that he had sent the men for something, for he stood there waiting until they returned, and then Nick could see that the four of them were engaged in fastening a number of bars into place; and over these, when they had arranged them, great beams of wood were fastened, so that they could not be moved at all, save from the outside of the door.

The detective smiled grimly.

He was surrounded by walls of gold: a ceiling of gold hung above him; a floor of gold was under his feet; bars of gold closed the doorway against him. Surely, no man was ever before confined in a prison like that one.

When it was all completed, and his prison had been arranged to the satisfaction of his captors, Ismalla removed one of the bars from its place and stepped inside.

Then, while the others stood near the door, watching him, and ready to go to the rescue if the detective should venture to make an attack, he loosed the ropes which bound Nick, and so set him free.

"I do not think that you can escape," he said to the detective.

"It certainly doesn't look so," replied Nick.

"Night and day there will always be one of us outside your door, watching."

"That is a wise precaution. You will have something else to watch besides the gold; eh?"

"Otherwise, you will not be molested."

"It isn't your intention to starve me, is it?"

"No. You shall have food."

"Well, I feel as if I could eat a raw dog right now."

"You will be fed when we take our food."

"Humph! Will you tell me now what you propose to do with me?"

"We shall keep you here."

"For how long, please?"

"Until death releases you."

"Eh? Do you mean until you kill me?"

"No; until you die."

"A natural death?"

"Yes."

"So I'm a lifer, am I?"

"I don't know what that is."

"That is a short word which means a prisoner as long as life lasts."

"Yes. You are a lifer, if that is what it means."

"And I am never to be permitted to leave this room?"

"Never while you live. You will be waited upon three times in each twenty-four hours, for I believe that is the method by which you count time. Your wants and your necessities will be attended to——"

Nick took a sudden step toward his captor and stood in front of him threateningly.

"I am a strong man, Ismalla," he said. "I could seize you now, where you stand, and I could choke the life out of you before you could escape me, or before your three relatives there could come to your assistance. Why is it that I do not do it, I wonder?"

The young chieftain did not move. He did not flinch.

Instead, he looked calmly into the detective's eyes, as he replied:

"You are mistaken. If you were ten times stronger than the strongest man who ever lived, you would be helpless under my touch. See!"

He extended his hands, palms outward, and Nick saw that he wore something upon them which was held in place by straps, and which seemed to bristle with thousands of fine points, like needles.

"You could not reach me, or touch me, without pricking yourself with these points," Ismalla said to him, with a half-smile. "Each one of those fine points is tipped with a poison which paralyzes, but which does not kill. It attacks the nerve centers. It deprives its victims of strength. It makes them seem like one who is dead for many hours. You would be conscious, but you could not move. You would breathe, but you could not speak. If you do not believe me, try it."

"I have a good notion to take you at your word," muttered the detective, half to himself.

"It is your opportunity, if you care to take advantage of it."

The handsome young chief stood before him, with a contemptuous smile on his face, and it was that, and his attitude, more than anything else, which goaded the detective into making the attempt.

He leaped forward suddenly, attempting, as he did so, to seize Ismalla's wrists, and thus to turn the poisoned points upon him; and, as he sprang forward, he cried out:

"I'll give you a taste of your own medicine, you young villain!"

And so he seized him, wondering, as he did so, if the three men outside the bars would rush at once to the assistance of their chief.

CHAPTER V.

THE RETURN OF THE RIDERLESS HORSE.

But there was no need that they should.

The young guardian of the golden mountain had spoken truly.

As the detective made the attack, Ismalla managed to turn his hands so that the sharp points that were fixed to the pads held in his palms were embedded in the detective's wrists.

Instantly Nick was conscious of a terrific shock, which in effect was exactly the same as an electric shock.

He felt suddenly deprived of all his strength.

His knees gave way under him; his arms sank helplessly to his sides, and he collapsed upon the floor, as utterly helpless as a new-born babe.

He heard Ismalla laugh; he heard other laughter from beyond the bars of his cell.

He tried to move, and he could not do so. He attempted to speak, but he could not utter a sound. He made an effort to look around him, but only to discover that he could not see. It was as if the lights had suddenly been extinguished, and he were left in total darkness.

Nick knew when Ismalla left the room. He could hear the men put the bars into place, but after that he either lapsed into unconsciousness, or he fell asleep, he never knew which it was.

* * * * * * *

We must hasten back again to Murray for a time.

Toward evening of the day when Nick Carter was captured by his enemies, big Tom Short was seated on the steps of the piazza, smoking and talking with Chick, when his horse—the horse that Nick had ridden away a few hours before—dashed into view on a dead run.

It had been discovered that Nick had taken the horse out for a ride, for it will be remembered that at the time of his departure nobody saw him go.

But now Tom started to his feet in dismay.

"Well, I'll be eternally and teetotally doggoned!" he cried.

Chick had also leaped to his feet.

"It is your horse, Tom!" he cried. "The horse that Nick rode!"

"Yes."

"And he has returned alone!"

But Tom did not wait to give any answer to this remark.

He was already leaping, in gigantic strides, toward his horse, and in an instant more he had thrown himself into the saddle, turned the horse around as if on a pivot, and was riding madly back over the trail by which the horse had approached them.

"Come on!" he yelled back at Chick. "Nick is probably shot, and lying back along the trail somewhere!"

By the time that Chick had secured a horse and thrown a saddle over its back—he did not wait to cinch him—Tom was already out of sight along the trail, and from that moment on they both rode wildly, until, long afterward, they came to a halt almost together at the very spot where Nick had been dragged from the saddle to the ground.

It was Tom who saw the marks of it, and he slid to the ground and got down upon his knees to study the signs.

After a moment he looked up.

"It was a lariat," he said.

"Think so?" asked Chick.

"No; I don't think so. I *know* so. They roped him right here. Roped him from them bushes over there, probably. Here's where he struck the trail, shoulders first. I reckon it must have stunned him, too."

"Who do you suppose did it?" asked Chick.

"Them galoots up at that cave uh gold done it, pard."

"And they have carried him away a prisoner."

"That seems to be about the size of it."

"Is there a trail?"

"Sure there's a trail. See it? Come over here. There's where the feller stood when he dropped the loop over Nick's head. Over here is where three more of 'em was waitin' f'r him to do the act. Hold on, now. Jest you stand right where ych are till I look over the ground a bit."

Fifteen minutes later he returned to Chick's side.

"Well," he said, "there ain't no more that we can do jest now."

"What did you discover?" asked Chick.

"There were only four of them in the party. After they roped Nick, they went up yonder in the brush and cut some twigs. I reckon it was to make a litter to carry him on."

"Then he must have been badly hurt."

"He was either hurt, 'r they were afraid to let him loose. I reckon one idea is about as good as the other."

"Well?"

"That's all."

"But cannot we follow the trail?"

"We don't have to."

"Why not?"

"Because we know where they have gone to."

"The cavern of gold!"

"Yehr sure right about that, pard."

"Come on, then, Tom. We know the way to that table-land valley, at least."

"Hold on there, Chick. Not so fast."

"Why not? What's the matter?"

"Well, f'r one thing, look at my hoss. He's dead beat out. We're twenty miles from home, and that hoss has been over it three times to-day already, and he's done it all since noon."

"That is true," admitted Chick.

"He can't even carry me home. It'll be as much as he can do to get himself there; anyhow, I'm goin' to walk, and lead him."

"But what about Nick?"

"We'll start after Nick in the morning."

"And, in the meantime, they may be killing him, Tom."

"Look here, Chick, yeh've got sense enough where most people are concerned, but the minute yeh begin to talk about Nick yeh ain't got any."

"But——"

"*If* they was goin' to kill him, they'd ha' done it right here, instead uh usin' that rope, wouldn't they?"

"I suppose so."

"Anyhow, if they was goin' to kill him, they sure wouldn't ha' taken the bother uh makin' a litter to pack him all that distance, and I reckon they wouldn't ha' packed him a mile if they'd been thinkin' uh makin' cold meat uh him. Nick ain't in no immejit danger, if any man of a sea cook should turn a summerset and ask yeh."

"Possibly he isn't; but, all the same——"

"All the same, yeh're goin' to do as I say, jest f'r the present, Chick. Anyhow, we couldn't overtake them now. I doubt if we could do it if our hosses were fresh — which they ain't, not by a long shot."

"Perhaps not."

"It's thirty mile from here to that table land, if it's an inch."

"I agree with you there, and I ran every step of the way there once."

"I know it; and I'd run every step of the way there and back again, too, this minute, if I thought it 'u'd do any good. But it won't. This ain't no common stunt that we've got set f'r us now; I'll be doggoned if it is!"

"Tell me what you suggest doing, Tom."

"We'll go home first, and git Cal. We'll put our heads together, and then we'll go to bed and sleep on it. In the mornin', with fresh hosses, we'll strike the trail for that there table-land up in the mountains, f'r we know of our own knowledge that the cavern uh gold ain't very far away from there."

"That is true, Tom."

"It sure is. We know that Nick found it once, without anybody's help, and I say that what he did alone Cal and you and me ought to be able to do together."

"It does seem so."

"Anyhow, we'll do it, if it takes the rest of our natural lifetime. What do yeh say to that, Chick?"

"I say, shake on it!"

"There she is! Now, it's gittin' dark. You trot along ahead, and jest tell 'em that I'm comin'. I'm goin' to walk, and lead this old hoss uh mine. Me and him has been friends a good many moons, and when he's dead beat out like that, I'm a-goin' to stay with him till he feels better. G'wan, now."

That evening there was a council of war in the house where the men were staying.

Jessie, for whose sake all this trouble had come about, was still not well enough to add her voice to the deliberations; but Hilda Hart, who had accompanied the party on that other rescue trip, dressed as a boy, was there to offer what suggestions she could.

"The hull long and short of it is this," said Tom, after the discussion had lasted a long time without any appreciable result. "Nick has been roped and captured by them dago Indians what lives in the cavern uh gold. They have taken him there, where they once took my ward, Jessie, and Hilda. They let Hilda go then, because, I suspect, she wasn't good-lookin' enough to suit 'em, 'r because they didn't need but one, and they preferred Jessie.

"Anyhow, that's where Nick is right now—in that there cave—if anybody should step up to the captain's office and inquire."

"We know where he is. The question is, How are we to get him out of the cavern?" said Chick.

"We've got to find it. We've got to light out uh here as soon as it's daylight in the mornin'. We've got to take pack-hosses, and provision ourselves f'r a month's stay in them mountains; and, if we haven't found it by that time, we'll send back f'r more, and stay right on there till there's ice on the hinges uh the lower regions.

"Nick found the way to git into that there cave, and I'm doggoned if I don't think I can do it, too, if yeh give me time enough."

"And, in the meantime, they may be torturing him," said Chick.

"They *may* be, but I don't think they are."

"Why don't you? What did they capture him and take him away for?"

"Because he held their secret. They're jest goin' to tie him up there, and keep him in cold storage f'r the rest uh his nacherel life; but, to my way uh thinkin', they ain't even considerin' killin' him. If they'd been goin' to do that, they'd ha' done it in the first place, Chick."

"May I say something?" asked Hilda.

"Yes."

"I want you to take me with you, as you did before."

"What for, Hilda?"

"Because I think Mr. Carter told me more about his adventures when he found Jessie than he told the rest of you. I was quite instrumental in guiding you to the right spot before, and I have a feeling that I can do it again—that I can find the way into the cavern of gold. Will you let me go with you, as you did before?"

"What do yeh say, boys? Shall we?" asked Tom.

"I'm going, anyhow," said Hilda, "whether you let me, or not! If you don't take me, I'll follow on your trail—so there!"

"I reckon," said Tom, with a grin, "that *that* settles it!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAIL TO THE HEAD-SHAPED ROCK.

Nick Carter's captors had paid absolutely no attention to him after he fell to the floor, half-paralyzed, as a result of his contact with the poison that was on the tips of the needlelike points that had pierced his flesh.

How long he remained there he never knew; but when he awoke, as if from a refreshing sleep, he was exactly where he had fallen.

His jailers had been into the rooms since then, and had left a good supply of food and fresh cold water.

He stood in need of both, and he marveled at the ravenous appetite with which he devoured the food. Not a scrap of it was left when, at last, he had finished.

After that he waited many hours for one of the men to appear, and he had begun to think that possibly they had deserted him altogether, when he heard a noise at the bars across his door, and after a moment Ismalla came into the room.

"I have three poisoned points in my hands," he said calmly to the detective; "and so, unless you desire a repetition of your previous experience, you will keep your distance."

"All right," said Nick. "I wish you'd tell me one thing, though."

"What is it?"

"How long is it since that happened?"

"Three suns—what you call three days, I believe."

The detective was amazed.

"Is that the truth?" he demanded.

"It is. I never speak but with the truth."

"Look here, Ismalla, you seem like a pretty good sort of a fellow."

"If it had been my fate to have lived in your world, I should have been glad," he replied simply.

"Then why don't you leave this God-forsaken place and go and live in my world?"

Ismalla shook his head.

"It is not my destiny," he said.

"It isn't your intention to murder me, is it?"

"No; unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless it should become necessary to prevent you from escaping."

"But suppose I should take a solemn oath never to reveal what I know about this place?"

"You would not keep it."

"I *would* keep it."

"You think you would, but you would not."

"I tell you that I would!"

"You would mean to do so. Possibly you would keep to your oath for a time—for years, perhaps, but the day would come when you would reveal all."

"You don't know Nick Carter, Ismalla."

"I know the secrets of the human heart. They have been taught to me since my birth by my grandfather. You might keep your oath until the time came for you to die; but then you would betray the secret to somebody. It would be fate. You could not help it."

"Confound it! I tell you——"

"Peace, my friend. I believe that you mean what you say—now. I only doubt your ability to remain firm after years have passed. And years? What are they, when you consider the watch that my family has kept here for five centuries?"

Nick was silent.

"I will believe another oath, if you will make it to me," said Ismalla, presently.

"Tell me what it is."

"If you will make oath that you will make no effort to leave this cavern, that you will make no attempt to return to your people, or to communicate with them, I will take down those bars at the door, and you shall have the freedom of the cavern. You shall be one of the family with us for the remainder of your life."

"Do you think that I could make such an oath?" asked Nick.

"Why not?"

"Do you think that I could keep it, if I should make it?" he asked, again.

"Why not?"

"It isn't human nature. No. I will not make it. I will escape from you some day, no matter if it is years hence."

"I came here to tell you something," said Ismalla, changing the subject abruptly.

"Yes? What?"

"You have been in dreamland for three days."

"You have already told me that."

"Much has happened in that time."

"What, for example?"

"For one thing, your friends have come in search of you."

"I have an idea that they would not be long in doing that."

"They are encamped out in the valley, beyond the pear-shaped stone."

"Well, what of that?"

"They had the young lady with them—the same one who was dressed as a boy when you came here before. The one who was our prisoner at one time, and whom we liberated."

"Hilda, you mean?"

"I believe that is her name—yes."

"Well?"

"You did not understand what I said to you."

"You said that she was out there on the plain with the others."

"No. I said, 'They *had* the young lady with them.' She is not with them now."

"Where is she, then? Has she gone back?"

"No."

"Where is she?"

"She is here."

"*Here!* What the devil do you mean?"

"She is here in the cavern, in the same room she occupied once before."

"Great Heaven! Do you mean that you have captured her again?"

"Yes."

"When? How?"

"This morning."

"How? Where?"

"She found her way, alone, toward the place where the pear-shaped rock is located. I was there, in the fissure, and I saw her coming. I saw that she was alone. I opened the rock, so that the way might be left open for her to enter, and then I stepped back and concealed myself."

"And she walked straight into the trap?"

"If you call it a trap—yes. She came into the fissure. She saw the rock where I had swung it open. She saw the opening behind it, which leads out upon the ledge. She uttered a cry of delight. She believed that she had found what she was seeking."

"It was a devilish trick for you to play, Ismalla!"

"You should thank me for what I did."

"Why so?"

"I brought her here for your sake, to keep you company. You shall marry her. She shall be your wife, and you will both dwell with us. Then, later, I will find the other. I will find Jessie, and bring her here. She will be *my* wife, and——"

"Stop, Ismalla, or I will forget that you have got those devilish things in your hands, and I'll fly at your throat! I suppose you stood aside and let her pass the rock, and then you stepped out and closed it after her?"

"Precisely."

"It is a wonder that she did not shoot you."

"She did try to do so, but I disarmed her."

"And brought her here to the cavern?"

"Yes."

"May I see her? May I go to her?"

"If you will give me the oath I asked of you only a moment ago, you may do so."

"I will give you such oath, to hold good until I have returned to this room and permitted myself to be locked in again, so that my condition will be the same as it is now."

"Swear it."

"I do swear it."

"By the soul of your mother, and by the souls of all your blood?"

"I so swear."

Ismalla stepped back a pace; and then, with the gesture of a king, he motioned Nick toward the door.

In another moment the two were in the corridor together, and then Ismalla led the way, by devious turnings through the corridors, to the room where Hilda was imprisoned.

"Wait," said Nick, before Ismalla touched the door. "Has she been told that you would bring me to her?"

"Yes, if you took the oath."

"Then she is expecting me?"

"No; she said you would not take it."

Nick smiled.

"It did not occur to her that I could take it conditionally," he said. "Open the door, Ismalla."

The door was opened, and then Ismalla discreetly drew back; but, when Nick had entered the room, he closed and locked it after him.

"Hilda!" said the detective, advancing toward her.

"Mr. Carter!" she exclaimed, extending both her hands. She was dressed in the garb of a young cowboy, and she looked the part.

"I did not believe that you would take that oath," she continued; "and, therefore, I did not expect that you would be brought to me."

"I took it conditionally, Hilda. I took it only for the time that I am with you. When I return to my own prison-room, my oath is at an end."

"We will escape," she said brightly.

"I hope so. I think so," he replied. "You do not seem greatly frightened."

"No. I have no fear for the present."

"Why?"

"Because Ismalla has promised me that no harm shall come to me. I think he is a good man, according to his understanding. He is different from us. He belongs to a different world—as different as if he came from another planet."

"I quite agree with you there. Tell me of our friends."

"They will find us," she said, in a whisper that had something of mystery in it.

"You speak with confidence, Hilda."

"Because I feel confidence."

"Tell me why."

"When I left home, I brought with me a large package of rice for food. When I started out this morning, it was after all the others had left the camp. They would not have permitted me to go otherwise."

"No."

"I filled the pockets of this coat with rice. I left a note saying that I would leave a trail of rice wherever I went."

"And you did so?"

"I did. The trail leads directly to the pear-shaped rock."

CHAPTER VII.

THE DETECTIVE'S PLAN OF ESCAPE.

For a moment following upon what Hilda had just said to him Nick Carter was elated, but immediately the reaction came, for he had not a doubt that Ismalla would have a watch set upon the pear-shaped rock, since Hilda had so easily found her way to it; and, if he did that, not a regiment of men, or a division of solidery, could force their way into the cavern of gold against its four protectors.

The hole through the rock behind the pear-shaped barrier was not larger than the proportions of a hogshead. Two men might pass through it, side by side, but even that would be a difficult matter.

The path along the ledge was nowhere wider than three feet, and in many places it was even narrower than that. On the one side of it the precipice rose sheer and smooth, and as straight as a plumb-line, to unknown heights overhead; on the other was the almost bottomless abyss.

"It would be no trick at all for Ismalla and his three uncles to defend that entrance against Tom and Cal—and Chick," he thought. "It would be an easy matter for the defenders of the cavern to place obstacles in the way of an attack which the friends outside could not hope to overcome."

Plainly, it seemed to him, their escape from the cavern depended wholly upon their own exertions—upon their own strategy, upon their own resources.

After a moment of silent thought about the matter, he turned to Hilda again.

"Tell me how Ismalla captured you," he said.

"It was my own fault, Mr. Carter. In the first place, I realize now, when it is too late, that I should not have ventured out alone; but, you see, I relied upon my masculine costume, believing that, even if I were seen, I would not be recognized, but that I would be mistaken for a man."

The detective smiled.

"Nobody would mistake you for a man, save at a distance," he said.

"In the second place, I was a little fool not to suspect a trap when I discovered that secret door past the rock so invitingly open."

"I will grant you that, Hilda."

"But I walked into it with all the ingenuousness of a tenderfoot."

"Yes. And then——"

"Why, then, when I was past it and on the ledge, I heard a noise behind me, and, turning swiftly, I saw that the rock had been closed against the cliff; that my way of escape was effectually shut off, and that Ismalla—whose name I did not know, and whom I had never seen before, for he did not appear at all when I was a prisoner here—was standing quietly, with his arms folded across his breast, between me and the way to liberty."

"You were startled, weren't you?"

"Startled? Yes. But I did not lose my nerve, for all that."

"I can understand that."

"I had my revolver, of course. I drew it instantly and pointed it at him."

"What did he do?"

"He didn't do anything at all—only smiled at me in the most maddening manner.

"'Stand aside, and let me pass!' I demanded.

"He never moved. He only stood there, grinning at me, with his arms folded and with a mocking expression in his eyes that almost made me pull the trigger."

"I almost wish that you had done so."

"I do not. What good would it have done? Not a bit; for, as I discovered a moment later, one of the other men was at that instant approaching me along the ledge, although I did not hear him, and had no idea that he was near until he reached around me and took the pistol from my hand.

"But that was after Ismalla had said to me:

"'You need not be frightened, Miss Hilda, for you will not be harmed in any way. I assure you of that. You will only be detained; that is all. You would not shoot me. You would never forgive yourself if you did so. All the rest of your life you would see my body—my dead body that you had killed—falling, falling, falling, down into that abyss, and you would be haunted by the sight to the end of your days.'

"I knew that he spoke the truth, and I was on the

point of returning the pistol to my belt, when the other man reached around me and took it away."

"And then?"

"Then I walked between them to that frightful stairway that is cut in the rocks, where one clings to a rail that is half-way between heaven and earth."

"You did not mount that stairway unaided?"

"No. Ismalla carried me. He did it as if I were a child—as if I were a feather—smiling and talking to me, and encouraging me all the time. He is a marvelously strong man, Mr. Carter."

"I do not doubt it. He looks it."

"And he is a marvelously handsome man, too."

"You have discovered that, have you?"

"Yes. Isn't it a pity that he is—er—what he is?"

"What do you think he is?"

"Just a barbarian, who somehow has attained a remarkable education, considering his environments. Just a poor dupe of his ancestors, who has been made a slave to a lot of legends. He is just a machine that was set in motion centuries ago, and that has been kept running by descent. He is like a Corsican, who inherits hatred. This man has inherited love."

"Love!"

"Love for his legends; love for what he considers to be his duty; love for the idea that it is his destiny to carry out the orders that were delivered to his ancestors eighteen generations back of him. It is a sort of fanaticism."

"And he reassured you, did he, that no harm should befall you?"

"Yes."

"Tell me how he did that?"

"I couldn't, Mr. Carter. It was too funny—too absurd."

"He told you, I suppose, that you could never hope to return to your friends? That you would be detained here to the end of your life, and that you should never leave this cavern at all, unless you took oath to link your life with theirs?"

"Yes—in effect."

"Did he ask you to be his wife?"

"No; but——"

She paused and blushed, and the detective laughed.

"I know what he suggested," he told her, "because Ismalla also suggested the same thing to me. He believes that we could be a solace to each other in our captivity. He believes that time would reconcile us to foregoing the world. It is his plan, Hilda, that you shall be my wife, according to whatever rites of marriage they practise here, and that he will go after Jessie, with whom he is deeply in love, and bring her here for himself. Did he not tell you that?"

"Yes."

She was blushing, and she was confused, but Nick went on calmly:

"It might be well," he said slowly, "to lead him to believe that we are considering it. He would be, in a measure, reassured about us. He would be less vigilant, perhaps. It would certainly make him feel more comfortable on one point."

"What is that?" she asked.

Nick replied slowly, but with emphasis:

"Ismalla thinks that I am in love with Jessie. He believes that that is why I came here that other time to rescue her. It was I who found my way in here when she was a prisoner in his hands; it was I who filed through the chains which bound me when they caught me here; it was I who carried her away from here while they were sleeping. He can account for all that only in one way, and that is that Jessie is beloved by me."

"I understand you."

"That is why he has suggested marriage between you and me."

"But what good will it do us, even if we appear to consider the matter favorably?"

"I cannot answer that. It may serve us wonderfully well; it may do no good at all—but it can certainly do no harm."

"Suppose he should insist that the ceremony—whatever it is like—should be performed at once?"

"We could object, on the ground that we could not accept his form of ceremony; that, while we were near consenting to his terms, we could not recognize his form of marriage as sufficient. He would respect such scruples as that. It is his education to respect duty."

Hilda turned away, and was silent a moment. Then she said:

"I will be guided by you."

"Thank you. Now, tell me how they are treating you since they brought you here."

"As well as possible. I have the freedom of the cavern. I can go and come wherever and whenever I please through those corridors and rooms of gold; but in that outer room—the first large room that we passed through when they brought me here—there is always one of the men on watch. He does not speak to me, but he looks at me—terribly, with eyes that burn and frighten me."

"I am afraid, Hilda, that you are not as safe here as you suppose yourself to be," said the detective anxiously.

"I do not fear the man. He seems rather to fear me, and I know that he stands in awe of Ismalla," she replied. "Let me continue."

"Well?"

"In that room there is a bar across the door—the outer door. It is too high for me to reach, and, I suspect, too heavy for me to lift, if I could reach it, for it is of gold.

But you could reach it, and you could lift it, too, Mr. Carter."

"Yes," he replied. "I think I could."

"That is all. I have the run of the cavern, as I told you. It occurs to me that I might act for you, and that by so doing we might plan some method of escape, for, to tell you truly, I have absolutely no hope that our friends outside will ever succeed in obtaining an entrance here, even if they find the way."

Nick was silent a moment, and then, with sudden inspiration, he said:

"Hilda, there is one method of escape open to us, and I believe it is the only sure way."

"What is it? Tell me."

"If it can be accomplished at all, you must do it."

"I?"

"Yes."

"Tell me how."

"When I was first brought here, I attacked Ismalla in the room where he imprisoned me. He warned me not to do so, telling me at the time that he wore in the palms of his hands small leather pads that were perforated by small, needlelike points. Those points were tipped, he said, with a poison which paralyzes without otherwise injuring the victim.

"I did not believe him, and I rushed to the attack. I seized him by his wrists and sought to hold them so that he could not touch me with those points; but he managed to twist his hands around so that he pricked me with them. Instantly I fell to the floor, powerless, and presently I became unconscious."

"Yes?"

"If you will notice his hands carefully when he returns here to take me back to my room, you will discover those strange weapons concealed in the palms of his hands."

"Yes."

"You have the freedom of the cavern. If you can discover where he keeps those small weapons, and can manage to secure one or more of them, the way of escape will be open to us."

CHAPTER VIII.

DRUGGING THE FOOD.

"I think," said Nick, a little later, "that I will take advantage of the fact that Ismalla has not returned for me. I am under oath not to try to escape until after I have been once more returned to my own room and fastened in it; but I am not under oath not to look around me and plan for that escape when the opportunity shall come."

"Shall I go with you?" asked Hilda.

"No. Remain here. If Ismalla returns very soon, try to invent some excuse to keep him here as long as possible."

"I will."

"The more time I have for roaming about the cavern, the more I may discover. I have a fancy, if possible, to find the room where he sleeps—the room which he calls his own."

The detective found the corridor deserted when he stepped into it.

Here and there he could see the lamps burning; those strange gold basins filled with some kind of thick oil from which a wick protruded, and, being wound around an upright post in the middle of the basin, finally thrust its lighted end into the air and burned steadily, without smoke or odor.

It seemed to be a part of their religion that these lamps should never be allowed to go out, and Nick was rather glad of that fact, for it permitted him to travel from one place to another almost as if he were surrounded by daylight.

He went softly but swiftly forward, peering into each room as he passed it, and presently he found again the same room from which he had rescued Jessie.

He was about to pass it without giving it especial regard, when some impulse compelled him to turn back and to approach it silently.

A heavy curtain hung across the door, and this he drew gently aside.

The door itself—a thing of polished wood, which was held together by strips of gold which were wound in X-shapes around the separated pieces—was half-open, and, peering inside, Nick saw instantly that he had come upon the room which Ismalla occupied.

Whether it had always been his room, and he had given it up to the uses of Jessie when she was a prisoner there, and ill, or whether he had changed to it since then for sentimental reasons, the detective did not know—and he cared less.

It was sufficient that he was certain that, for the present at least, it was Ismalla's room, and he passed inside.

It was a curious place, and it was filled with odd and curious things.

There were queer little gold-fastened cabinets hanging against he walls. There was an oddly fashioned desk, littered with parchments, in one corner. The couch, covered with tanned skins and rugs, was in another corner. A wonderfully wrought rug covered the golden floor. There were strange and unheard-of instruments of offense and defense hanging against the walls, many of them giving evidence of being centuries old; and there was a great, odd-looking chair there, too.

"I know," murmured the detective to himself. "These are the effects which once belonged to the old man—to Ismalla's grandfather. He has inherited them with his authority."

He stopped suddenly, and struck his hand against his forehead.

"In one of those cabinets," he muttered. "Surely, that would be where he would keep them."

He lost no time then, and he did not consider the consequences if he were caught here.

But he approached the cabinets at once, and opened it. It was filled with dried herbs, with seeds, with receptacles made of horn, and with others which had been carved out of rock salt; and upon each of the articles he found there there were fastened tags, which bore marks in strange designs, which reminded him of Chinese laundry tickets.

"The medicine-chest," thought Nick. "There are none of those poisoned pads here. Let me try the other one."

He passed to it quickly, and opened it.

Like the other, it was filled to overflowing, but with a different class of articles.

Here were strange-looking implements.

Little daggers of unmistakable steel, straight, sharp-edged, and needle-pointed. Small poniards, round-bladed and as sharp at the point as needles. Knives that were straight. Knives that were curved. A rapier of wonderful workmanship, but totally unlike anything that the detective had ever seen before, demonstrating the fact that in that forgotten past of Ismalla's ancestors there were many known crafts that had been equal in point of excellence to their counterparts of to-day.

Nick was on the point of taking down some of these articles, to examine them more closely, when he was startled by hearing a step outside the door.

Instantly he leaped back, away from the cabinets.

As he did so, and turned, his eyes fell again upon the couch.

It has been said that this was covered with tanned skins, and with rugs, and Nicks instantly perceived that these draped to the floor, and would afford an excellent temporary hiding-place.

He did not hesitate.

For one thing, he did not care to be discovered in that room; for another, he did long for an opportunity to watch Ismalla when he was himself unobserved.

He dropped upon his hands and knees. He laid himself flat upon the floor, and then he rolled quickly under the couch, drawing the skins and the rug down in front of him, just as the curtain at the door was brushed aside and Ismalla entered the room.

It was evident at once to the detective that Ismalla did not suspect his presence there. Doubtless, if he thought at all about it, he believed that Nick was still with Hilda.

More than likely it was a part of his plans that they should be together as long a time as they pleased, since the detective had made oath that he would make no effort to escape while he was at liberty in the cavern.

He entered the room, and at once seated himself in the quaint old chair, which he drew forward to the desk, and began to busy himself among the parchments that were littered there.

He acted as if he were searching for something, and suddenly he appeared to have found it, for he left the chair and crossed the floor to a huge chest that was bound together with bands of gold.

He raised the lid, and then again he studied the parchment in his hand for a long time, until at last he put it aside and reached into the chest.

From the interior of the chest he presently produced an article which any schoolboy would have called a powder-horn, although a very small one, and this he dropped into one of the pockets of his cape; and then, abruptly, he rose and left the room.

As greatly as Nick desired to examine the contents of that chest, which was still open, he believed that it was more important that he should investigate Ismalla's intentions with that horn—or, rather, with the contents of it.

"I can return to the chest," was his thought, "when I have discovered what Ismalla is up to, for he has something on his mind, that is certain."

The detective followed him stealthily, deciding in his own mind that if he were discovered he would make it appear that he was taking the afforded opportunity to roam around the interior of the cavern at his will.

But Ismalla was so absorbed in what was on his mind that he did not once look back.

And, after going a little way through the corridors, he took a direction that had hitherto escaped the notice of the detective.

He did it by passing through a mere hole in the wall, barely large enough to permit of the passage of his bulk; but beyond that was another corridor—a narrow one, which descended abruptly and which seemed to wind around a huge rock—for Nick observed that he was no longer surrounded by gold, but that all around him was now mere earth and stone.

Nor were there lights burning in this passageway, so that the detective would have found it difficult to follow had not Ismalla picked up and carried with him one of the taper-lamps from the starting room above.

"Possibly," thought he detective, "this may be another means of entrance to and egress from the cavern of gold. It is hardly likely that they would have but one. Even a woodchuck provides itself with two doors to its home."

They descended a long way, Nick still following the glimmer of light carried by Ismalla, until at last they came out upon a wide ledge over the chasm—the same chasm, Nick thought, through which the other entrance to the cavern was obtained, only that here he believed himself to be several hundred feet lower down.

He waited in the darkness of the passage until Ismalla had crossed this space and had disappeared into another hole beyond, and again he made bold to follow.

Once more he discovered the light glimmering ahead of him, and once more they presently came out upon a ledge of the cliff.

And here were two of Ismalla's uncles. Here, also, was the kitchen of the cavern—the place where the food they ate was prepared; and these men were cooking over braziers—over the same primitive fire-pots which the Egyptians used in the days of the building of the pyramids.

Nick came to a halt while he was still concealed by the darkness of the passageway, and from that point of vantage he watched them.

He saw Ismalla approach the man who was stirring the contents of a pot that was boiling over the brazier. He could see that they talked calmly together for several moments, and then Ismalla lifted the horn he had brought there with him and poured several drops of its contents into the pot, counting them, apparently, as they fell.

"That is all I wish to know," muttered the detective to himself. "They are cooking up a dish for Hilda and me. That is evident.

"But what for? Do they mean to poison us? Hardly that. They would not have waited till now to do that, nor would Ismalla have studied that parchment so long a time if he was merely in search of something that would kill.

"What, then, is it? Something to make us sleep? Evidently. I will think that over later; but just now I have other fish to fry."

He turned hastily and retraced his steps through the passage, feeling his way with his hands along the wall as he went, but remembering the way so well that he had no difficulty in finding it now.

In a very short time he reached the top, and passed through the half-hidden hole in the wall into the main corridor of the cavern of gold.

His first act then was to hasten again to the room occupied by Hilda; but, as luck would have it, he encountered her ere he was half-way there.

"Hilda," he said quickly, stopping her, "I am convinced that they are making arrangements to drug us, so that we will sleep, perhaps for a long time. I don't know why, unless they wish to leave us alone in the cavern while they leave it for a time. What I want you to do now is this."

"Yes," she said.

"Return to your room, and wait there for me. I will join you in a few moments; but, if it should happen that I do not see you again until your food is served to you, you must manage somehow to make them believe that you have eaten it, while, as a matter of fact, you must not swallow a morsel of it. Go back now, and wait for me. After you have pretended to eat, you will also pretend to sleep, and so soundly that you will not be roused even if they call to you and shake you."

He turned and hurried away, then, toward Ismalla's room, while she turned in the opposite direction to go to her own.

And Nick found his way to Ismalla's quarters, and to the open chest, into which he lost no time in rummaging.

But he did it with great care, in order that he might leave no traces of the fact.

And he was rewarded, for almost at once he discovered two of the needle-mounted pads, like those he had seen in Ismalla's possession.

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER'S CLEVER TRICK.

"If only they will work," he thought, as he placed them together so that he would not prick himself with the points, and dropped them into one of his pockets.

And the act of doing that brought another thing to mind.

He recalled the fact that his pockets were entirely emtpy; that he had not a weapon of any kind in his possession.

Ismalla had deprived him of them, it will be remembered, and now he remembered suddenly that he was unarmed.

He stepped quickly to the cabinet where he had discovered the ancient weapons, and provided himself with one of the best of the knives. He longed to take the rapier, too, but he knew that it would be missed at once, if Ismalla should happen to look in there.

Then he looked around him hastily, in the effort and with the hope of finding his own things; but he saw nothing of them, and, realizing that Ismalla might return now at any moment, he decided to let well enough alone, and hastened from the room and along the corridor toward the place where Hilda was awaiting him.

In a few words, he told her of his success. He related then how he had followed Ismalla down the winding passage to the kitchen of the place, and described how he had seen him put the poison, or the drug, in their food.

And he had just completed the story, and reiterated his instructions concerning what she was to do, when Ismalla appeared at the door.

"It is time that we broke our fast," he said, advancing into the room. "Will you eat with us, in the great room, or will you have your food served here?"

"If it is all the same to you," replied the detective, "I will take mine in my own room. You have left us so entirely alone that I find it difficult to keep my promise to you. I would rather you returned me there, before I am tempted to break it altogether."

"As you will. And you, Miss Hilda?"

"May I have mine here, please? I do not like your rooms, Ismalla."

"They will not harm you, Miss Hilda. If either of them should dare to so much as address a word to you, without my permission——" he stopped.

"Well?" she asked.

"His life would be forfeited," was the cold reply; and it was uttered in a tone which carried conviction with it.

"Come, Mr. Carter," he said, then. "I will take you to your room, lest that temptation becomes too strong for you to withstand. Food will be served to each of you presently."

When the detective was again in the prison-room which had been assigned to him, Ismalla lingered for a moment, but he took good care to let the detective see that he held the needle-mounted pads in his hands.

"Your imprisonment has not been irksome thus far, has it?" he asked.

"Imprisonment is always irksome," replied Nick, "even in a palace of gold."

"But you have had agreeable companionship?"

"Very."

"I am wondering if you bore in mind the suggestion that I made to you?"

"What suggestion?"

"You have not forgotten that your fate is to remain here with us for the rest of your life, have you?"

"No. That is, I have not forgotten that you say so."

"And that the fate of Miss Hilda is to be the same?"

"I remember perfectly what you said about it."

"Have you discussed it with her?"

"Yes."

"And also my suggestion that she should become your wife?"

"It might not be the first or only time that we have discussed that," replied Nick diplomatically.

"Ah! I supposed——"

"What?" asked Nick.

"Nothing."

"That I was in love with Jessie?"

"Yes."

"You were wrong. I never saw her in my life until I found her here in this cavern."

"Even so. To see her but once is sufficient."

"For you, possibly. For me—no."

"It is Hilda, then?"

"It certainly is not Jessie."

"What of my suggestion, then?"

"We have discussed it, as I have already told you."

"And have agreed?"

Nick shook his head.

"Why not?" asked Ismalla.

"For one reason, if for no other, we would not regard your marriage rites, whatever they may be, as sufficient, Ismalla."

The chieftain appeared to think deeply for a moment. Then he raised his head and said:

"You have in your own world what you call priests, who perform such ceremonies for you, have you not?"

"Yes."

Ismalla stood silent for a long time now; and then, without a word, he turned on his heel and strode out of the room, pausing beyond the door long enough to put the great bars into place. Then he disappeared.

Nick was smiling.

"I have given him something to chew on," he was thinking; "but I am very much afraid that in doing so I have endangered the liberty of some poor minister. If a countenance that is usually masklike ever spoke as plainly as words, his did at that moment; and I could read his thoughts like print.

"He was thinking: 'Jessie, when I bring her here, will raise the same objection that this man makes. I must have a priest—and I will get one.'

"That was what was passing through his mind. I am very much afraid, Ismalla, that you are the last of your race; or, if not that, then that you are the last of your

race who will keep guard over this treasure. Love for a woman will do in a moment what eons of time could not accomplish, for it will end by making you false to your vows to your ancestry."

He was interrupted then by the appearance of one of the elder men, who brought with him a bowl of steaming soup, a platter of nicely cooked chops cut from a mountain-sheep, some nuts, and some wild cherry.

He placed all this on the table, and took his departure without uttering a word, fixing the bars in place as he went.

Nick was hungry.

The aroma of the steaming soup and of the chops filled the room, and whetted his appetite, and the temptation to eat was strong.

He would have done so instantly if he had not seen that episode in the kitchen; but he was perfectly satisfied in his own mind that every bit of that food was drugged, and he stood for a long time regarding it.

He smiled grimly when he noticed that each of the dishes in which the food was served had been manufactured by hammering them out of solid plates of gold. Not many men, even in palaces, were served like that.

There were no knives or forks, but there was a ladle-like spoon of the same metal.

But Nick remembered that he now had a knife in his pocket, and, producing it, he cut the chops from the bones and threw the meat taken therefrom under the couch upon which he was supposed to sleep. One chop and all the bones he left on the platter.

The problem of ridding himself of the soup was different; but at last he had a happy thought, although it seemed like sacrilege to carry it out.

There were two of the curiously woven blankets on his couch, and he took one of them and wadded it into a ball.

Then, very slowly, in order that it would be absorbed as he did so, he poured the soup upon it. He did it almost drop by drop, so that none of the moisture would escape to the floor, to betray him; and when it was done, and the bowl was nearly empty, he wadded the blanket in his hands again, and thrust that, also, under the couch.

He studied the appearance of the table carefully after that.

"It certainly does look as if I had eaten," was his comment. "Unless Ismalla chooses to look beneath the couch, which he is not at all likely to do, he will never guess that I have not done so. I only hope that Hilda will be able to do as well as I have done."

After an interval, he stretched himself upon the couch, taking care to arrange it so that the second blanket would not be missed, and then he composed himself to sleep.

That is, he appeared to do so, for he kept his eyes closed, satisfied that when Ismalla returned he would do so stealthily, and that he would peer through the bars at his prisoner, to discover if he were sleeping.

In this he was not mistaken, although two or three hours passed before it happened.

Nick was somehow conscious that Ismalla was near the door, without having heard a sound; and presently, through his lashes, he saw the young chieftain's face.

The detective remained perfectly still, breathing with apparent heaviness; and, after a moment of investigation, Ismalla removed the bars and entered the room.

He came at once to Nick's side, and stood there looking down upon him.

Then he reached forward and shook him rather roughly by the shoulder.

"Wake!" he called out. "Wake, Carter!"

Nick did not stir.

Ismalla called again, and with the same result. Then he bent forward and deftly raised one of Nick's eyelids; but the detective had guessed what he would do, and he had already rolled his eyes upward, and the lid was dropped again.

He heard Ismalla mutter something in his own language, and then he turned away and went out of the room, fixing the bars in place, as if from habit, rather than from any fear that his supposedly sleeping prisoner could escape.

In a moment more he was gone; but still Nick Carter did not move. He wanted to give Ismalla and his followers plenty of time to leave the cavern, if such was their intention.

But when he believed that an hour or more had passed he rose slowly from the couch and hurried to the barred door.

He had no doubt that he could force his way past them.

Gold, as everybody knows, is soft and malleable, and the purer it is, the softer it is.

These bars were short and large, but Nick Carter was

possessed of great strength, and he had no doubt but that he could bend one or more of them sufficiently to break his way out of that room, if only he were given the time and the opportunity.

He seized one of them in his hands; he braced his feet against another that was lower down in the doorway, and then, with all his great strength, he pulled.

An ordinary man might not have accomplished the feat, but after a moment the detective felt that the bars were giving, and particularly that one against which he had braced his feet.

He persisted, and exerted himself to even greater effort; and then suddenly the bar bent like a bow, and, being thus relieved from its fastenings, dropped to the floor outside.

Again he essayed the same task, and after a little a second bar fell away from its place, and the way was thus open for the detective to pass from the room into the corridor.

He hurried at once to the apartment where he had left Hilda, expecting to find her awaiting him, and with the hope of escape for them both singing in his heart.

But when he pushed aside the curtain he started back, with a cry of surprise.

The room was tenantless.

Hilda was not there.

CHAPTER X.

THE DETECTIVE'S HERCULEAN TASK.

For a moment the detective was nonplused.

He looked toward the table, and saw there what was left of the food that had been served to Hilda. The soup-bowl was half-emptied. The chops, as in his own case, had all disappeared but one.

Remembering what he had done himself, he peered under the couch, but there was no evidence that she had hidden part of her dinner there.

Presently, however, he discovered the remainder of the soup in the gourd which had served Hilda for a water-pitcher, but the remnants of the chops were nowhere to be found.

"I did not tell her about the chops," mused the detective, "for the reason that I saw none in the kitchen. I saw only the soup. She was hungry, and she has thought that my warning did not extend to the chops, so she has eaten them.

"But what have they done with her? Where has she been taken?"

The question was unanswerable at the moment, and there was no other way than to search for her.

The interior of the cavern has already been described sufficiently. It is enough to say that now he dashed from room to room, with as much speed as he could, until at last he came again to the one occupied by Ismalla.

Here he found that the door had been fastened, and by a clever contrivance, which at first puzzled him.

But he did not propose to take the time necessary to search for the secret fastenings: instead, he returned to his own room on a run, and, selecting two of the heavy bars of gold, he returned with them.

One of them was as much as he could lift and swing, and it made an excellent mawl with which to batter in the door to Ismalla's room.

It was made of heavy hard wood, but it could not withstand that onslaught; and Nick, being now satisfied that for some reason Ismalla had thought it best to fasten Hilda there, attacked it with all the vigor he could command.

It gave way presently, and the detective stepped across the mass of wreckage he had made and entered the room.

Hilda was there. She was on the couch, sleeping, and one of the blankets had been thrown over her.

Nick approached her quickly and shook her, but she did not respond.

He spoke her name and called to her, but still she did not answer.

She breathed easily, although somewhat heavily, and Nick understood that she had, indeed, eaten the meat, and had, therefore, succumbed to the drug.

Why they had chosen to take her to that room, and to fasten her in, was a mystery, "unless," he thought, "Ismalla feared to give her a strong dose of the drug, and believed that she might awaken before he wished her to do so."

For a few moments then he stood there in doubt what to do; but, realizing that he had not yet made sure that Ismalla and his uncles had gone, he hastily left the room and made a tour of the cavern.

He passed through the first big room, and on to the next one. All was deserted.

He crossed that and made his way through the last corridor, and so on out upon the ledge at the top of the cliff.

He hurried to the edge of the abyss, and peered over it; and here a surprise awaited him.

The railing by which one was assisted to pass up and down the steps, and without which it was utterly impossible to do so, had disappeared.

By some method unknown to the detective, it had been removed, leaving only a blank wall of rock, to which nothing less adhesive than a fly could stick.

"We are not likely to get out of the place by that route," he thought. "Even if Hilda were conscious, we could not descend by those steps. I doubt very much if I could do it myself, and I certainly shall not make the effort—and leave her here."

"If there is nothing else to be done, I can arm myself with those daggers and the rapier, and await Ismalla's return. Then I can fight the whole bunch; and, if I can get them at a disadvantage, I can win, too."

There was nothing more to be done there, so he hurried back again into the cavern.

A glance into the room where Hilda was sleeping told him that she was all right, and he hurried on to that hole in the wall which was the way to the kitchen—and, possibly, to another means of escape from the cavern.

He seized one of the lights and carried it with him, and presently he had crossed the first of the open places and arrived at the second one, which was the kitchen.

There was charcoal there, and also the brazier, and by careful search he found a supply of fresh meat, some nuts, and other food.

Hunger asserted itself again, and after a moment's thought he said to himself:

"Ismalla and his men haven't gone away for a few minutes; they have gone for a considerable time. Twenty-four hours, at least; possibly forty-eight, or even more. I have time enough, and I will eat."

And so he started a fire, and deliberately cooked and ate the chops; and, while he was engaged in eating, he thought:

"Point one: Ismalla removed that railing along the wall in the cañon, and evidently he has no idea of returning by that route. Hence, there is another way of getting out of here.

"Point two: Chick, and Tom, and Cal are encamped in the valley beyond the pear-shaped rock, and hence Ismalla would leave here by a different route than that, if he could.

"Point three: If there is another way out of here, it must be through that hole at the opposite side of the kitchen, which I can see from where I sit now.

"All that is a sort of a one, two, three argument, but I guess it's good, all right."

The last remnant of the last chop was thrown aside, and he rose from the table where he had been seated.

And now another surprise awaited him.

The hole in the rocks to which his attention had been called was but a little larger in diameter than the length of his body, but still he could walk upright inside of it; but, when he had gone a hundred feet through it, it came to an abrupt termination.

Inasmuch as he was carrying a light in his hand, he did not at first perceive that there was a faint glimmer of a light of another sort around him; but presently, as he stood there, pondering upon what to do next, he became conscious of it.

Naturally, he looked up—a thing he had not thought to do before—and an exclamation of surprise escaped him.

He was looking up through a shaft that ascended vertically directly over his head.

It was not larger in circumference than an ordinary well, which is to say, that it was not more than four feet in diameter, and away up at the top, a distance of a hundred and fifty feet or more, there was a round spot of light, and, far above that, the blue sky.

He searched around the sides of the shaft for signs of steps, or for some means of ascending through it to the top, but nowhere was there a sign of a foothold, save that the rocks were more or less rough and uneven.

"Plainly," he murmured, "this is now the only way out of this cavern. It is equally plain that Ismalla and his followers have gone out by that way. But how?

"I have it!" he exclaimed, a moment later. "They must have some kind of a rope ladder—probably a horsehair one; and, when they went out, they simply pulled it up after them."

He was silent for a long time after that, studying the sides of the shaft; and at last he muttered:

"It isn't a question of whether I *can* do it. It is that I *must* do it!"

Hurrying back into the cavern, he returned to Ismalla's room, and there secured a pair of thick buckskin moccasins that he had seen, and, returning with these to the bottom of the shaft, he removed his shoes and put on the moccasins.

He had already stripped himself to his underclothing,

and now, with grim determination, he braced his shoulders against one side of the shaft and his feet against the other, and began slowly to work his way upward.

It was a fight against fate, which he only conquered inch by inch.

A dozen times he came near losing his grip and dropping to the bottom, where he knew that he would be killed or maimed if once he should fall.

But he persisted.

His shoulders where he pressed them against the rocks were lacerated and bleeding, and they pained him acutely with every move he made.

The moccasins on his feet were already worn through, and the sharp edges of the rock cut mercilessly into his toes.

But he kept on.

Fortune favored him in one instance; if it had not done so, it is doubtful if he could ever have reached the top.

About half-way in the ascent—possibly a little more than that—he came to a projecting stone.

It was small, to be sure, terribly small, for it did not protrude into the shaft more than six inches, and yet it was enough, so that by great effort he succeeded in getting one foot upon it, and after that he gradually straightened himself until he stood upright

And so he rested.

Then, by changing from one foot to the other, he found that he had recovered his strength and wind—and he once again started for the top.

The last ten feet of that terrible climb was the hardest, for he was well-nigh spent; but now he knew that, if he released his hold, he would be dashed to pieces at the bottom of the shaft, and he shut his teeth together and fought his way, inch by inch, until at last his hands gripped the edges over the top, and by a final heroic effort he drew himself outside, and sank, almost exhausted—in safety.

He did not know how long he remained there on the ground, resting. He did not, could not, count the time.

But at last he began to think; and then, with an effort, he started to his feet.

It had come to him, with a suddenness that was appalling, that it would be next to impossible for him to return to the bottom of the shaft by the way he had come, unless there was, as he had supposed there would be, a rope ladder there for him to lower into place.

If such a thing were not there—if there were no rope there—then he had practically left Hilda to her fate—practically deserted her.

A single glance reassured him.

It was there. Not exactly a rope ladder, but an arrangement which served the purpose almost as well.

It was a horsehair rope—a single rope, with loops fastened to it at convenient distance for placing the feet in climbing; and it was made secure around a shaft of wood which he had only to lay across the top of the hole.

The way of escape seemed clear now.

He had only to return to the cavern by descending the rope to the bottom of the shaft in order to rescue Hilda.

It was all very simple now, he thought, requiring only a little time and patience to accomplish it.

Then it was that, for the first time, he looked around him, to discover where he was, and he discovered that he was almost at the peak of one of the lesser mountains, from which he could plainly see into the valley where he supposed his friends were searching for him.

A faint pathway led away from the spot where he stood, and he supposed that it would take him to the valley, to Chick, and Tom, and Cal; and he searched eagerly the grassy plain below him, in the hope of seeing some sign of one or more of them.

But he saw nothing but the green grass, the blue sky, and the mountains.

Then he turned, and, having dropped the rope into the shaft, he placed his feet in the loops and started down.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ROAD TO FREEDOM.

At the bottom of the shaft he dressed again, although it gave him considerable pain about his shoulders, and his feet were so badly swollen that it was almost impossible to put on his shoes.

But he succeeded in doing so.

The one thing that troubled him now was the fact that Hilda was unconscious.

It is true that there was sufficient rope so that he could fasten it securely around her body, under her arms, and then, having mounted to the top, draw her up after him.

But he knew perfectly well that there was great danger in such a course.

Nothing on earth could prevent the rope, with the strain upon it, from twisting and swaying, and he real-

ized that before he should succeed in getting Hilda's unconscious body half-way to the top, it would be turning like a spindle at the end of the rope, but it would also be swaying from side to side in the shaft, with imminent danger of knocking her brains out against the rocks.

He thought of tying her to himself, and so carrying her to the top; but there was the terrible danger that the rope might not be able to bear the double strain thus put upon it, and, if it should not, they would both be precipitated to the bottom—and to instant death.

"Anyway, she must be taken out of here somehow!" was his thought, as he started once more for the cavern to find her.

And then, when he reached the room where he had left her, a solution of the entire problem occurred to him instantly.

There were blankets galore in the cavern, and he could swaddle her in enough of them so that, if she did strike the sides of the shaft in making the ascent, she would not be bruised—or, at least, not severely so.

She was sleeping exactly as he had left her, and so he left her for a moment, to make one more excursion to Ismalla's room.

There he helped himself to the rapier. It was a beautiful weapon, and, aside from its utility, if he should happen to be forced to defend himself, it was a prize.

And then it occurred to him that his own weapons must be somewhere in the cavern, and he began a systematic search for them.

He found them, too, although he almost despaired of doing so before he came upon them.

They were in a chest in another room, and concealed under several neatly folded blankets; but they were there, and he lost no time in securing them.

"Now," he thought, "I feel quite like myself again; and, if Ismalla and his uncles do not return before I arrive at the top of that shaft, it will be a mighty cold day before they get me into this place again!"

Hurrying back to Hilda's side, he busied himself in preparing her for the perilous trip through the shaft.

It was fortunate that she was unconscious, otherwise she might have resented the manner in which he rolled her about while he was wrapping her in the blankets and tying them upon her.

When he had completed the job, Hilda could not have moved a muscle of her body, even had she been fully conscious; and the blankets were so arranged that she could not possibly strike against the walls of the shaft in such a way as to hurt her.

And now the detective hastened his work with all possible speed.

He carried Hilda to the bottom of the shaft, and there he securely knotted the rope around her, fixing it so that it would not draw, but would still remain snug enough so that her body could not slip through it.

With one last look around him, to see that everything was in readiness, he left her then, and started up the rope, loop by loop.

Now that everything seemed to be working out so smoothly, he was suddenly anxious lest their enemies should return at the last moment, and so he in time to prevent the escape; and almost unconsciously he hastened his exertions, so that he was soon at the top of the shaft.

But there was no one there to offer any objections, and so, after resting himself, he seized the rope and began to raise the unconscious Hilda out of the cavern.

This he did very slowly, and whenever the weight at the end of the rope began to sway, he stopped and waited for it to cease.

It was a case of inch by inch, almost, that he pulled her up, but, just as pennies make dollars, inches make feet, and feet make yards.

Bit by bit the task was accomplished, and at last the mummylike-looking figure in the blankets was safely at the top.

"I thank God for the strength and the endurance He gave to me!" said the detective fervently, when he realized all that it meant to him to see Hilda safely out of her peril; for he felt that she was safe now. He would not have hesitated in that moment to have faced a dozen Ismallas and as many more uncles.

He removed the blankets from Hilda's body and flung them into the shaft—and was immediately sorry that he had done so, for already the afternoon was dying away toward evening, and he feared that Hilda might need them in the chill night air that was to come.

But it was done, and so he arranged the things outside the shaft as he had found them when he first climbed out at the surface.

He drew up the rope and wound it around the shaft of wood, as it had been left by Ismalla, and then he placed the whole in exactly the same position in which he had first discovered it.

And then, as he turned again toward Hilda, he discovered that her eyes were open and that she was gazing wonderingly around her, as yet only half-conscious and very much dazed.

"Hilda," he said; and she looked at him strangely.

"Hilda," he repeated; but still she did not reply.

He went to her and took her hands between his own, chafing them vigorously; and then slowly, very slowly indeed, she began to comprehend her surroundings.

"Where am I?" she whispered.

"Safe," he replied.

"Safe? But where? Where are we?"

"Outside the cavern; on the mountainside, Hilda."

"The cavern? Ah, yes."

It all came back to her then, and she was quite still for a moment. Then she murmured:

"I ate the chops. I was so hungry—and you said nothing about the chops."

"I understand," he replied.

"I ought not to have done it, ought I?"

"No."

"It has made it all very much harder for you, hasn't it?"

"A little; but we are safely out of it now."

"Did you carry me through that terrible gorge, down those awful steps, and along that ledge of rocks?"

"No; we came out another way."

"And what are we to do now?"

"As soon as you are able to do so, we will start away from here. Night will soon be upon us, and there is no moon now. Do you think you could stand upon your feet?"

"I will try."

He assisted her, but he soon discovered that she had no strength at all. The subtle drug that had been given her had deprived her of it.

"I will carry you until your strength returns," he said.

"Wait," she said. "In a moment I will try again. Tell me, did you strike Ismalla and his uncles with those needle-mounted pads?"

"No. They went away and left us alone in the cavern. I only pretended to sleep when they came to rouse me, and as soon as they were gone, I acted."

"And if you had not known what they were about, we would now be sleeping down there, waiting for their return, wouldn't we?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"And if you had been as foolish as I was, and eaten of those chops——"

"My dear, you are only like your mother Eve. She ate an apple and you ate a chop; that is all."

"You mean that we both fell under the stress of temptation, don't you?"

"Something like that—yes."

"What did you do with those needle things?" she asked, after a moment.

"I have them in one of my pockets."

"And if we are attacked, you will use them?"

"I will use them, or something else. Come. Will you try again, now, to walk?"

"Yes."

But again it was a fruitless effort, and so, without more words, Nick raised her in his arms, and, swinging her over his shoulder like a bag of meal, he started down the mountain.

The pathway already mentioned was but faintly discernible, but still the detective managed to follow it, and, although he was forced frequently to stop to rest, they made rather good speed.

Once, while they were resting, Hilda asked:

"When Ismalla returns to the cavern, he will not know how we escaped, will he?"

"No; I don't think so, I purposely left things so that he would not."

After an interval, she said:

"I think, if Jessie had been in my place, he would have let her go free."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because he loves her. He told me so."

"And yet," said Nick, "I believe that he has gone now to capture and bring her to the cavern, if he can accomplish it."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Then we must hasten."

"I think," added Nick, smiling, "that he has also gone to fetch a priest."

"A priest!"

"A priest, or a minister. He used the word priest, so I did the same."

"But what for?"

"I told him that we were considering that marriage

he suggested for us, but that we could not do so seriously without a priest. After that, I suppose it occurred to him that a priest would be equally necessary in the case of Jessie; and I think that is why he drugged us and went away."

"But do you suppose he expected us to remain unconscious for two or three days from the effects of that drug?"

"He expected that I would do so. I do not think he gave you as much as he did me. At all events, when I found you, you were locked in his own room, and there was food and water enough on the table beside you to have lasted you a week."

"Suppose he should succeed in getting Jessie? Suppose he should take her to that cavern again, Mr. Carter? Suppose——"

"I don't suppose, or intend to suppose, that Ismalla will ever see the inside of that cave again until I have interviewed him outside of it," replied the detective, with grim determination. "I am positive about one thing, and that is, that he and his followers cannot approach the cavern of gold at all save through the coulée and the cañon by which we came here; *and I propose to wait for him somewhere along that route.*"

"And fight?"

"If need be—yes."

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST OF THE GUARDIANS.

"Well, Nick, I'll be eternally doggoned if I ain't glad to see yeh!" said Tom Short, as he pulled the detective over toward the fire. "And Hilda —— Come here, girl, and let me put my old arms around yeh, jest to be sure it's you."

If the detective had possessed six hands, the three men would have grasped them all, for Nick and Hilda had just come upon them out of the darkness, after descending the mountainside from the mouth of the shaft by which they had made their escape.

"Give me some of that coffee that smells so good, and I will tell you all about it," said the detective.

And he did, going into every detail of his experience in the cavern, and ending the story by giving it as his opinion that Ismalla and his uncles had sneaked past them in the night in order to make their way through the cavern, and would do the same thing when they returned, if they were not prevented.

"And yeh reckon that he's gone after Jessie, do yeh?" asked Tom.

"That is my belief," replied the detective.

"And how do yeh reckon they'll git her? Hey?"

"They will enter the house and take her. The house stands alone. Jessie and Hilda's mother are there alone. If they should scream, nobody would hear them. It won't be any stunt at all to make the capture, Tom."

"Mebby yeh'r right, Nick," said Tom reflectively. "Now, let's figger upon jest when they'll try to do it."

"To-night," replied Nick, without hesitation. "They have had just about time to get there, since they left the cavern."

"And when do yeh reckon they'll try to get past us here in order to get back to that cavern, Nick?"

"Some time to-morrow night, if we wait here for them; but I don't propose to do that."

"What do yeh propose?"

"That we start down the cañon now, as soon as we can pack up. One of us will go ahead with a light until we get past the dangerous places. After that it will be easy sailing."

"And then, what?"

"We will ambush them in the coulée—near the mouth of it, if we can."

"And plunk every mother's son of 'em full uh lead! Hey?"

"No. They are only barbarians, Tom. They are not savages. They have been kind to Hilda, and even considerate of me. They act only according to their lights. I want to capture them alive."

"Alive? What the devil for? Are yeh goin' to put 'em in cages and show 'em?"

"No; but I am going to force that fellow Ismalla to take a taste of civilization, and to let the lights in his cavern of gold burn out. I think that five hundred years is long enough to keep watch over a treasure. He made a prisoner of me and now I'm going to make a prisoner of him. I don't propose that any more girls shall be carried off into captivity in order to perpetuate a family."

"Right yeh are, Nick! No more do I. But I'd be f'r killin' the outfit first and civilizin' 'em afterward. However, I said you could be the boss, and I'm ready to take orders."

The journey through the cañon need not be described, for although it was not uneventful it was made without accident.

The party arrived at the mouth of the coulée shortly after daylight in the morning, and there, just far enough back in the hills to conceal themselves, they resolved to wait for the men of the mountain with their captives.

The horses were taken back into the hills, where their presence would not disturb the silence, and then, after giving each man his station, and commanding Hilda to keep absolutely inactive when the crucial moment came, the detective and the others composed themselves to wait.

The sun was just at the meridian when they suddenly became conscious that somebody was approaching them up the coulée; and in a moment more Nick discovered one of Ismalla's uncles stalking with stately tread toward them.

Tom Short raised his revolver, and in another moment would have shot the man dead had not Nick caught his arm and stopped him.

"None of that," he whispered.

"Then let me rope him. That's what they did to you."

"All right."

The man was passing unsuspectingly along when the rope hissed out from behind the boulder and fell over his head; and then, before he could cry out, Tom leaped from his place of concealment upon him and pinned him to the earth.

He had barely been dragged out of sight behind the rocks when his two brothers appeared. They were bearing a litter upon which some person—undoubtedly Jessie—swaddled in blankets, was lying. Ismalla was walking gloomily behind it.

Just as Nick and his friends were on the point of dashing forward to the attack, Jessie called out from her place on the litter:

"Please stop!"

Ismalla said something to his men, and then halted instantly. Then he went forward and spoke to her.

"What can I do for you?" he asked calmly.

"Take me home! Take me home again! Oh, please take me home!" she cried out.

Ismalla shook his head.

"It is impossible," he replied. "Your destiny is there;" and he pointed toward the mountains.

"You are a villain!" she exclaimed.

"No; I am a creature of fate, Miss Jessie," he replied; and then he added something in his own tongue to the men who carried the litter.

Instantly they started on again; but they had not taken three steps before two ropes sang through the air, one from either side of the coulée.

They were thrown, one by Tom Short and the other by Cal Huskins, and they were as unerring as rifle-balls.

The men, one at each end of the litter they carried, were dragged to the ground. The litter itself fell to the trail with a crash, and a scream from Jessie, and at the same instant Nick Carter leaped from his place of concealment and confronted Ismalla, when, forgetful of all else, he would have flown to Jessie's aid.

But he saw Nick, and halted.

He half-turned—and discovered Chick prepared to receive him in that direction.

Then he drew himself up proudly, folded his arms across his breast, and, with his head held high and a scornful smile on his lips, he waited in silence.

Already he could see that his uncles were bound and helpless; already he realized that there was no such thing as escape for him.

Tall, handsome, dignified, with something of the scholar in his bearing and his features, he waited.

Nick slowly drew nearer to him.

"Ismalla," he said, "I have escaped from the cavern."

"So I perceive," was the cold reply.

"I brought Hilda away with me."

Ismalla did not reply.

"Ismalla," said Nick again, taking another step nearer to him, "give me your hand."

"My hand? Why?"

He betrayed his surprise at the strange request. He had expected to be killed.

"Give me your hand," repeated the detective.

Still with wonder depicted in his face, Ismalla stretched out his hand toward the detective, and Nick grasped it suddenly and vehemently.

The effect was marvelous as well as astounding, for Ismalla sank to the ground in his tracks as if he had been shot.

Nick Carter's palm contained one of those needle-pointed pads with which he had himself once been overcome.

And now a second diversion arose.

Jessie struggled to her feet from among the blankets on the litter, and cried out:

"You have killed him! You have killed him!"

"He is not even injured, Jessie," said the detective. "In a day or two he will recover; and even now he hears all that we say, and is conscious of all that is happening here. But presently he will sleep. And after that he will awaken; and when he does, Jessie, he will have no more wish to return to the cavern of gold. I have extinguished all the lights. The term of his guardianship is past. I shall take him back into the world with me, and I will teach him what it means to live as other men live. Put him on the litter, Tom."

"And what shall we do with these three uncles uh his'n?" demanded Tom.

"We will make them carry the litter back to Murray for us. And after that we will let them go, if they want to."

"What! Back to that there cavern in the hills?"

"They will not wish to go back, Tom. The lights are out. The watch is over. Ismalla is their chieftain, and they will cling to him."

"And that means, I suppose," said Hilda, "that we have got to civilize them all."

* * * * * * *

"Tom," said Nick, when they were riding, side by side, toward Murray, "do you remember that once you told me about a steel casket that was left with you by Jessie's father, and which you are to open when she is twenty-one?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Nothing; only if I were you I would not wait so long. I would open it to-morrow. Jessie is in love, and presently she will want to marry Ismalla. He owns a gold-mine that is worth considerable, and if I were you, when the proper time comes, I would be prepared to approve of the match."

THE END.

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